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r/neoliberal

# If Looks Could Kill: A thesis on why the United Healthcare CEO's murderer has become an internet hero

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Brian Thompson, late CEO of United Healthcare, was born to a rural family in Iowa. His father worked as a grain elevator operator. Thompson himself attended a public high school and then attended the University of Iowa. He lived a normal life of climbing up the corporate ladder, becoming CEO of UnitedHealthcare, before he was killed by Luigi Mangione.

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Luigi Mangione was born into one of the richest families in Maryland. He attended an all-boys private school in Baltimore before attending the University of Pennsylvania, graduating with both a BS and a MS from the engineering school there. When he graduated, he worked as a data engineer for a tech company. He then quit to join a surfing community in Hawaii before being radicalized by pseudo-intellectual right wing discourse online. He left a glowing review of the Unabomber's manifesto on GoodReads and retweeted tweets decrying the "woke mind virus" from Trump donors like Elon Musk and Peter Thiel, CEO of defense contractor Palantir. He also may have lost his mind from psychedelics. While he had legitimate grievances towards the healthcare industry due to United's alleged horrible treatment of his ailing mother<sup>1</sup> and his own back surgery, he ended up embracing the solutions of an anti-social anarchist terrorist for these grievances. He is not the first rich person to throw his life away for an esoteric cause - remember that Osama Bin Laden came from a rich family.

We like to imagine and fantasize about class revolution in prosperous liberal democracies. It is why movies like *The Joker* (2019) and TV shows like *Money Heist* are so popular. It is why slogans like "We are the 99%" and "For the many, not the few" are popular. Yet material conditions do not match this sentiment. In October 2024, inflation was 2.6% while inflation-adjusted wages grew by 4.6%. Inflation actually hasn't exceeded the rate of wage growth since January 2023, and we see this reflected in consumer spending choices, such as how American tourists to Europe increased 55% in 2023 from 2022 (on top of the 600% increase of American tourism to Europe in 2022 from 2021). As another example, concert ticket sales shot up 65% from 2019 to 2023.

The Biden-Harris administration spent \$36 billion bailing out the pension funds of the Teamsters' Union, and yet could not even gain a measly endorsement from their national leadership. Material conditions indicate that Harris should have swept the working class vote in 2024, and yet Trump won them over instead. What gives?

There are two books that I think you should read to better understand why this is. One is *Revolt of the Public: The Crisis of Authority in the New Millennium* by Martin Gurri. The other is *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment* by Francis Fukuyama.

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<sup>1</sup> I got the part about his mother from his published manifesto, which may or may not be fake. We will have to see what is reported in the coming days.

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Martin Gurri is a former CIA analyst who writes about the relationship between politics and mass media as a visiting fellow at George Mason University. *Revolt of the Public's* main thesis is that due to social media, the internet, and smartphones, everyone will always be mad about everything and that this will become the new normal going forward. There has always been elite corruption and failure, but the once cozy relationship that elites had with the media is fading quickly. Modern technology and the fragmenting of the media landscape has made it very easy to see in real time how elites fail to live up to promises by giving the hundreds of millions of people on social media a voice without vetting them. Everyone is mad about everything all the time, but this potent anger is as concentrated as the flavoring in La Croix sparkling water.

When MLK marched on DC, he had very distinct objectives. The Civil Rights Movement a formal leadership structure. They had a specific agenda that demanded specific legislation and they were strategic and calculating when appealing to the public (which is why they championed Rosa Park's case and not the similar case of a pregnant single teenager). A movement like Occupy Wall Street, by contrast, was very incoherent. People got mad on Twitter and decided to camp out in a park. They had no plan, no clear demands, no ideology or movement outside of being upset with the status quo. Modern protest movements are almost always against the current movement without being for any specific cause.

Gurri calls this the Center vs the Border, but we see this conflict with a lot of different names. The Heartland vs the Coastal Elites. Alt vs Mainstream. Main Street vs Wall Street. We see this everywhere. People tend to trust Yelp reviews more than professional food critics and Rotten Tomatoes more than Roger Ebert. In politics, people turned to Joe Rogan for COVID advice instead of listening to CDC panels. On the left, we have climate activists who throw soup on paintings and accuse Starbucks of "complicity in genocide in Gaza," blissfully unaware that Starbucks has not operated a franchise in Israel since 2003. People like Trump and Musk recognize this and appeal to this abstract anger, because Trump and Musk themselves are rejects of the elite circles of New York high society and Silicon Valley respectively and so can authentically brand themselves as champions of the people. It's not about the actual money, it's about the perception.

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This, of course, leads to stupid outcomes. People voted for Brexit and Trump because they wanted to “shake things up,” and when they realized what they had done they started to panic-Google “what does EU membership do for the UK” and “what do tariffs do.” But this anti-elite sentiment is powerful and is here to stay. I don’t think it’s a coincidence that the last time an incumbent party won the US presidency was in 2012, right as the world entered into the smartphone and social media age.

But why is it that right-wing figures like Trump and Musk can capitalize on this populist anger, and not left-wing populists like Bernie Sanders or Jeremy Corbyn? This is because people are not purely motivated by economic incentives. Again, the revealed preferences by actual consumer choices indicate that the Biden-Harris economy was actually a pretty good economic recovery from COVID, and yet this sentiment was not reflected in the 2024 election results. That is because identity is much more resonant with people than material concerns. For many, the question is less about whether their wages are rising and more about whether their values, sense of belonging, and cultural identity feel affirmed. There are certain economic aspects that people are upset about, such as the high cost of housing and inflation. But think about it this way: Housing is super expensive, but owning a house with a white picket fence is a part of the American cultural identity and the American Dream. Think about how people romanticize the times when a ham sandwich costed 50 cents. Having simple interactions with the economy that has consistent and predictable prices is a part of affirming these values and sense of community belonging.

Our wealthy society has increasingly become more atomized and fractured as community institutions and third places slowly die off. As we feel more isolated, we begin to become more attached to identities that we feel we are a part of, to gain a better understanding of our place in the world. These identity groups become substitutes for the communities that our ancestors would have been a part of. I think people intuitively understand this, which is why they choose to support candidates who can appeal to that sense of identity. This is where Identity by Stanford political scientist Francis Fukuyama comes in.

Identity is not purely something that can be categorized in a census form. Fukuyama argues that gun owners are an identity based on how well they mobilize as single issue voters and how they organize their lives around this hobby, up to literally buying coffee from a company called Black Rifle Coffee Company. College-educated women are another cultural

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identity separate from non college-educated women, as they place much more emphasis on bodily autonomy and advancing women's rights than their non-college educated female counterparts. College-educated women swung massively towards Democrats whereas non-college educated women did not. Fukuyama's core thesis about the components that create identity, as well as the solution to this identity problem, are outside of the scope of this essay, but I mention it because it's a useful tool for describing how class consciousness is misinterpreted.

The insurance industry has become a "sin eater" for everything wrong with American healthcare. The insurance industry is not an angel and plays a role in this dysfunction, but nobody is getting mad at the American Medical Association for restricting the supply of doctors by mandating medical students do four years of undergraduate college first or by lobbying to severely restrict the number of residency slots to drive doctor salaries higher. Nobody is getting mad at the American Society of Anesthesiologists for lobbying Blue Cross Blue Shield a few days ago to not limit the amount of time the insurer can cover for anesthesiology, thereby giving cover for anesthesiologists to "surprise bill," where they can charge an out-of-network rate at an in-network facility instead of accepting the cheaper Medicare rate for procedures (as patients usually can't select their anesthesiologists).

So this is where the theses of *Revolt of the Public and Identity* come together. Unfocused and uninformed public outrage at the dysfunction of the American healthcare system causes people to mark "good" and "bad" identities (doctors vs insurers) in terms of who to side with, and so we end up with a situation where the killer of a Healthcare Insurance CEO can be lauded as a working-class hero even though Mangione's family was richer and more influential than Thompson's [Mangione's family is deeply involved with the Maryland state Republicans, whereas Thompson stayed apolitical as far as I can tell]. So this idea of class consciousness, of "the people" vs "the elite," is overly-romanticized and does not actually create better outcomes to help people, nor is it representative of what working class people actually want, as they consistently vote for candidates that they feel affirm their values, sense of belonging, and cultural identity.